

MOUNTAIN OPERATIONS

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

RUSSELL A. ENO

Descriptions of mountain troops and their operations often begin with a reference to Hannibal's crossing of the Alps in 218 BC, during the Second Punic War. It was not an easy undertaking by any means. Historians debate as to how many men and war elephants he had with him, but most agree that in May 218 he started out in Iberia — today's Spain — with around 50,000 soldiers, 9,000 cavalry, and 40 elephants. Iberia was already the site of several Carthaginian territories and hence an ideal staging area for his army. When he reached Italy's Po River Valley five months later, he could count fewer than 25,000 infantry, 6,000 cavalry, and less than two dozen elephants. In two weeks in the mountains he had lost close to half his army. Some of his losses were due to the hazards in crossing rivers such as the Rhône, the weather — early Alpine snows had already begun before he left Iberia — and because of treacherous mountain terrain and hostile tribes. His route took him through the territories of some tribes with whom he was able to negotiate safe passage, but others took their toll as well. The Allobroges (Figure 1) later mentioned in Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic War, were among those whose territories he crossed. Hannibal soon learned their tactics and defeated them, capturing a number of their villages, but not before their ambushes had cost him the lives of soldiers, as well as pack animals, supplies, and time. The intent of Hannibal's campaign lies in the Carthaginian general's determination to transit the mountains, fighting only as necessary to achieve passage of his army. He hoped to rally support from Gallic tribes in Northern Italy and get at his enemy: the Roman army. Hannibal's crossing of the Alps was the first successful transit of mountains in history by a force of this size, and once across he was able to reconstitute his force, recruit, and wage war successfully on enemy soil until he was finally defeated at Zama in the year 202 BC, 16 years after he had crossed Spain's Ebro River.

The Gallic Wars of 58 BC to 51 BC again saw combat in the mountains, but this time the Roman Army was fighting not to simply cross the mountains, but to subjugate many of those same tribes who had impeded Hannibal 160 years earlier and restore peace to a region that controlled Roman access to the lands west and north of the Alps. The indigenous peoples, largely of Gallic descent, had increased in number, had honed their military skills by fighting constantly with one another, and had already expanded into what is today northern Italy. By 61 BC the largest of these races, the Helvetii — ancestors of today's Swiss — had begun moving into territories of the Allobroges, who had finally been



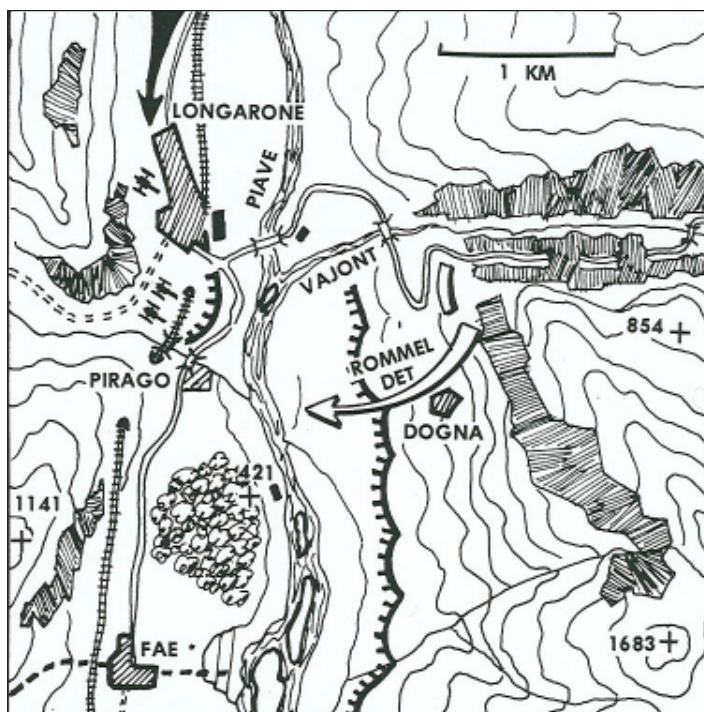
Department of History, U.S. Military Academy

Figure 1

conquered by Rome. At that time, only one understrength Roman legion of around 4,000 men was available north of the Alps to oppose the Helvetii, but Caesar quickly assembled five legions, each close to its full battle strength of 6,000 men, and moved to stop the invaders. In a series of bloody battles such as the Battle of the Arar River, Bibracte and the Battle of Vosges, Caesar stabilized the situation and paved the way for further campaigns against the Gauls, Germans, and Britons. Only by engaging and defeating the mountain tribes of the Helvetii on their own territory was Caesar able to secure the transalpine routes which would enable Rome to reinforce and resupply her legions to the north.

Any mountain operations that took place in the intervening centuries focused on tribal protection of their strongholds and maintaining control of key routes and passes that traversed the mountains. Control of the passes and those who sought passage through them is the stuff of legend, and the Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan became symbolic of mountain operations during the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-1842, in which British infantry found themselves fighting in terrain and against an enemy they had never before faced. Military tactics up until the early 19th century were predicated on massed formations on open terrain, and scant thought went into planning for fighting in the mountains except when necessity demanded control of specific key terrain. What experience nations had in mountain operations was confined to descriptions of marches through mountainous terrain en route to other battlefields. As result, little if any doctrine existed for mountain operations themselves. Doctrine, however, arises both from the lessons we learn and from our efforts to anticipate and predict future enemy threats. As nations around the world grew and empires expanded, border disputes in the mountains became more frequent, since it was the mountains themselves that had presented readily identifiable terrain features when men first laid down national boundaries and now nations sought to enforce or even redefine the borders.

It is not surprising that the Europeans would be the first to



Infantry Attacks, Infantry Journal, June 1944

Figure 2

develop and refine ways of operating in the alpine environment, given the concentration of mountains on the Continent, and the often contested nature of borders up on the roof of the world. The Alps, Pyrenees, Vosges, Apennines, Balkans, Urals, and Carpathians all offer obstacles and key terrain for military operations. By the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914, both France and Italy had trained and fielded units specializing in mountain operations. The Italian *Alpini* dated back to 1872 and consisted of 15 companies of men, later expanded to 10 battalions and eventually to regiments, recruited from areas such as the Tyrol, a region claimed by both Austria and Italy. (South Tyrol is officially Italian territory, but in the most recent census 69% of the population considered themselves to be of German stock.) The *Alpini* served a dual role, conducting operations on their own or serving as reconnaissance elements and guides for larger infantry units operating in their areas. French mountain troops served in the Vosges Mountains of southeastern France, were organized into battalion-size units, and had artillery designed to be packed and employed in the mountains.

By 1915 Germany had begun training light infantry units for mountain operations, drawing men from the Bavarian and Württemberg regiments, and in the

same year organized the German Alpine Corps for employment in the Tyrolean Alps. The Western Front has received the lion's share of attention from writers and historians, but in World War I few sectors have been more heavily contested than the Italian Front. The Italians held a front of 450 miles, longer than the French, British, and Belgian fronts combined; they faced the Austrians — the fourth largest army in Europe — and

mobilized, equipped, and deployed to the front an army of 500,000 men in only seven days. German soldiers of the Württemberg regiments fought alongside their Austrian allies, and one of the German officers was Erwin Rommel, later a General Field Marshal in World War II, who as a captain commanded a detachment of two rifle companies, a machine gun company, two batteries of mountain artillery, and signal and radio elements as part of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion (Figure 2).

He quickly adapted tactical, communications, security, and logistical tactics and techniques to that portion of the Carnic Alps which was his unit's area of operation, with great success. His *Infantry Attacks*, originally published in 1937, has become part of the core literature for small unit leadership, and describes Rommel's combat actions in Belgium and Northern France, in the Argonne, in the Vosges and Carpathians, and in the Alps bordering Austria and Italy. Translated and published by the U.S. Army in 1943, it found a large, appreciative audience and is today still prominent in Army professional development reading lists. General George Patton read *Infantry Attacks* cover to cover several times and passed its lessons along to his junior leaders. Much of what Erwin Rommel shared contributed to the formation of our own mountain units that served in World War II.

The history of U.S. mountain warfare training is logically intertwined with the preparation of troops for winter warfare because of the bitter cold, snow, and winds found at high elevations. Having observed Finnish successes along the Mannerheim Line against invading Soviet forces, the U.S. War Department established the 1st Battalion, 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment at Fort Lewis, Washington on December 8th, 1941. (By June 1941 the Germans already had 14 trained mountain divisions.) The Mountain Training Center (MTC) was first opened at Camp Carson,

Figure 3

West Point Military History Series



Colorado, and a winter/mountain training site opened at Camp Hale, Colorado in 1942. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 87th Regiment were activated, and by the end of November the 10th Mountain Division consisted of the 85th, 86th, 87th, and 90th Mountain Infantry Regiments, and had become the mountain fighting specialists of the Army. Augmented by divisional field artillery, cavalry, antitank, medical, and veterinary units and other combat support and combat service support elements, the division honed its combat skill and survival techniques through the winter of 1943-1944, and deployed to Italy in late 1944.

At this point in the war German defenses in the northern Apennines were anchored on the Gothic Line (Figure 3), later renamed the Green Line because of Hitler's conviction that its loss would present less of a psychological blow to German morale with the new name. This defensive belt ran from south of Spezio on the Ligurian Sea to Pesoro on the Adriatic, and averaged 10 miles in depth. Held by the German 10th and 14th Armies with a combined strength of 14 divisions, the line included nearly 2,400 mutually supporting machine-gun nests, over 470 positions for mortars, assault guns, and antitank guns, and extensive barbed wire and antitank obstacles. While Italian partisans' sabotage and disruption of German communications and rail movements hampered German efforts to some extent, the Gothic Line remained a formidable obstacle, and one which had to be breached if Italy was to be liberated and access to southern Europe gained. During February and March 1945, the 10th Mountain Division saw action during Operation Encore. In a nighttime attack on 18 February the 1st Battalion, 86th Infantry scaled snow and ice-covered slopes to seize Riva Ridge (Figure 4) and the remainder of the 86th Regiment went on to seize Mount Belvedere as the division and its adjacent British Expeditionary Force went on to seize the high ground and highway 64 south of Vergato. The capture of Riva Ridge took the German defenders by surprise and casualties on both sides were very light, but the Germans holding Mount Belvedere were alerted by the fighting and put up a stubborn resistance. The three days of heavy fighting cost the 10th Mountain Division 655 wounded and 195 dead, but the sacrifice of these great Americans meant that by breaching the Gothic Line the Division had now opened the way to the Po Valley and the defeat of Wehrmacht forces in Italy. In 114 days of combat, the 10th Mountain Division destroyed five elite German divisions at a cost of 4,154 wounded and 992 Americans killed in action. Following the post-war inactivation that befell many of our fine combat divisions and reactivation as a training division, in 1954 the 10th was once again called to serve as a combat division, this time in Germany.

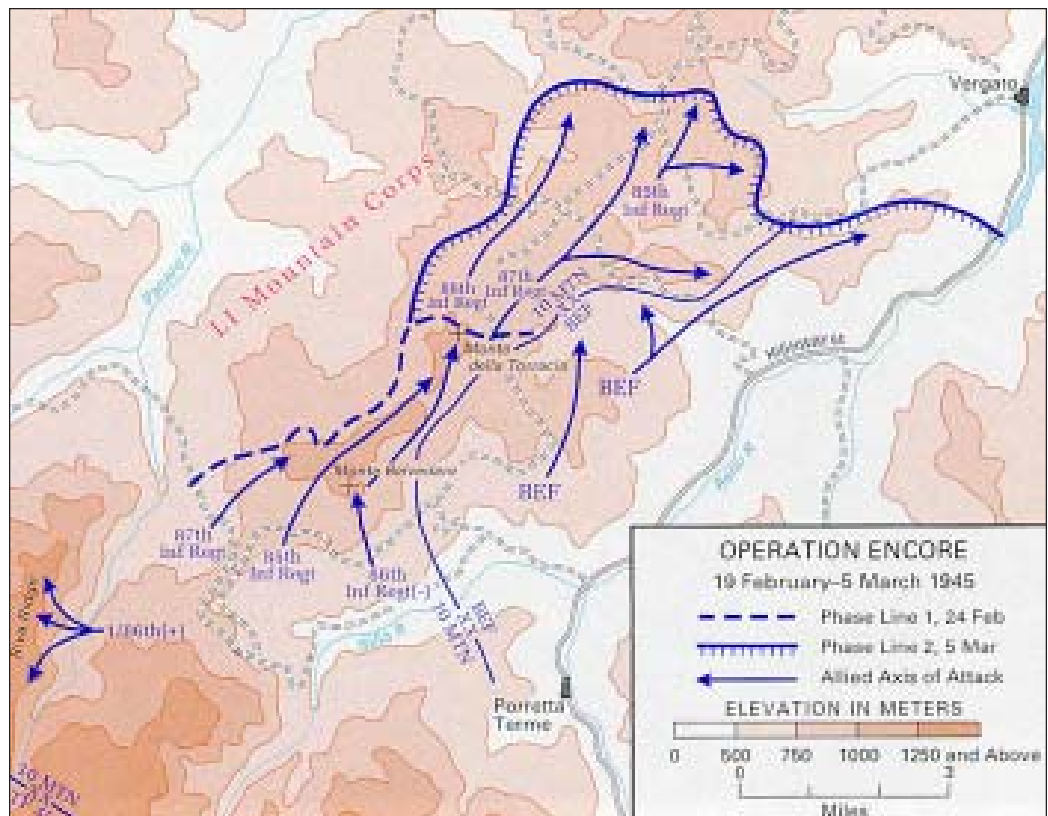


Figure 4

U.S. Army Center of Military History

Inactivated again in 1958, it was reactivated in 1958 and deployed 122 Soldiers to Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and over 7,300 of the division's Soldiers later served in war-torn Somalia.

In today's military literature we have come to realize that the term "mountain operations" does not simply imply one specialized branch, but applies as well to all organizations and units organized and trained for the conduct or support of mountain operations. All branches — combat, combat support, and combat service support — require specialized training, skills, and acclimatization in order to be effective in the alpine environment. The 10th Mountain Division has served with distinction in the global war on terror during its deployments to Afghanistan, along with elements of the 82nd Airborne Division, the 25th Infantry Division, the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), the 75th Ranger Regiment and other Special Operations Forces, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the 12th Aviation Brigade, the 391st Engineer Battalion, and a wide variety of other military units and civilian organizations. But all Soldiers and civilians preparing for deployment need and are receiving the much of the specialized training they will need at the replacement centers charged with preparing them for overseas movement, with in-country programs in place to further train and condition them.

The global war on terror will not be won overnight, but our incremental successes thus far have undermined the capabilities, assets, and morale of our enemies and will continue to do so until they are well and truly defeated.

Russell A. Eno is the editor of *Infantry Magazine*. He is a 1967 graduate of the University of New Hampshire ROTC program. He retired from active duty in 1991 and has been editor of *Infantry* since 1992.